

# FORWARD

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A mentor of mine, an avid outdoors enthusiast, once expressed his wonder of Maine with the observation that the state's woods, waters, and coast are so vast, varied, and endlessly interesting that one could spend a lifetime discovering and exploring them, and, at the end – still not have seen it all. That immensity and diversity of lands and waters include a correspondingly diverse collection of ecosystems, natural communities, and habitats that in turn give rise to an astounding array of species of wildlife across the state – thousands of species of invertebrates, fish, mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. From mayflies to moose, lynx to loons, and Alcids to Zanclognatha pine-barren moths, there is an unrivaled alphabet soup of natural diversity in Maine, stretching from tidewater thru the North Woods.

The vast scale, uniqueness, and diversity of Maine is perhaps best seen from space, through satellite images of North America – illustrated frequently in magazines and newspapers. Study them the next time you see them. In nighttime images notice how the lights from our growing cities, towns, and suburbs lace the land. Look closely and you will see that the largest tract of unlit (undeveloped) land left east of the Mississippi River, and one of the largest nationally, is the Maine North Woods. This is truly remarkable when one considers that some of the most highly populated and developed regions of North America surround it.

In daytime images additional details emerge. Observe Maine's thousands of miles of coastline, thousands of coastal islands, thousands of inland lakes and ponds, thousands of miles of rivers and streams, and thousands of acres of coastal and inland wetlands, intertwined throughout millions of acres of forestlands, mountains, farms, and growing urban settings. Maine's woods, waters, and shorelines have no match. First supporting Native Americans who depended on their resources, they continue to sustain an array of fish and wildlife no longer found elsewhere in the East, and they provide recreational opportunities to millions each year – to the great benefit of local communities and the state's economy.

The first *Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy for Maine* – not only focuses on this wonderful array of wildlife, ecosystems, and habitats, but it sets in motion actions to sustain all Maine's wildlife resources, thus ensuring these resources will be available for future generations to enjoy.

The word “comprehensive” within the title was carefully chosen, and is of critical importance from a number of perspectives. Its use indicates that one of the goals of this endeavor is to engage people and organizations with a diversity of interests and viewpoints. The word also speaks to the fact that this initiative embraces a broad spectrum of species within its definition of “wildlife”, including fish, invertebrates, amphibians, and reptiles, along with birds and mammals. It speaks to the fact that the approach includes rare and endangered species, as well as common and abundant ones, and little known species, as well as highly visible and popular ones. It speaks to the fact that wildlife is valued and sought by many: photographers, nature enthusiasts, educators, philosophers, and casual wildlife watchers, as well as by hunters, trappers, and anglers. It recognizes that wildlife can be valued and appropriately managed for all those varied uses, and that conserving habitat, often at an ecosystem or landscape scale, is at the root of any comprehensive approach.

The word “comprehensive” also speaks to fact that this initiative attempts to reach across internal and external agency divides that have their roots in historical divisions of responsibilities by coastal versus inland, fish versus wildlife, or game versus non-game. This point may well be the most significant of all, for it touches on the need to continue the ongoing evolution of thinking, missions, commitments, programs, and policies within the state agencies responsible for Maine’s wildlife resources: the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW) and Maine Department of Marine Resources (MDMR). Change is hardly ever easy, and the ongoing evolution within these agencies to address changing and expanding responsibilities has had its share of fits, starts, and growth pains. Substantial progress has been made, however, and this *Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy* provides another significant step for that evolution to continue.

Both agencies were originally established to manage harvested species. Both have subsequently had their mandates significantly expanded to include many other species and issues. For example when MDIFW’s responsibilities changed to include all wildlife, not just game animals, the number of species for which it was responsible grew from a few dozen to thousands. Both agencies have also been confronted with growing public demands and expectations for services and with huge increases in pressures on the resources -- much of it from increased development and human population growth. Regrettably, funding has not been made available to the agencies to keep pace with their growing responsibilities. Some funding programs have come on line in recent years, including the income tax check-off for non-game wildlife, the “loon license plate” for conservation, and a conservation lottery ticket. Although they have allowed some critical work to begin, especially for high priority, rare, or endangered species, and their habitats, all are voluntary funding sources that are undependable and inadequate in comparison to the need.

*Maine’s Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy* was developed as an outgrowth of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-administered State Wildlife Grants program – a relatively new federal grant program to help state fish and wildlife agencies meet their growing obligations. It was created as a companion to the existing (and highly successful) Federal Assistant programs supported by excise fees on hunting and angling equipment that have supported important work in state agencies for decades. It was the goal of all who participated in the development of *Maine’s Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy* that it not only guides the state’s fish and wildlife programs, but that it also serves as a catalyst to establish the State Wildlife Grants program as a significant and dependable funding source to meet the expanded wildlife conservation needs in Maine and nationally.

With Maine’s vast size and natural diversity, the challenge of sustaining our wildlife populations and habitats is truly daunting. But it is achievable, particularly if the state uses this newly developed *Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy* to engage those who were part of its development directly in its implementation. The interests represented during its development truly reflect the meaning of the word “comprehensive” as used in the *Strategy’s* title. Land trusts and other private conservation groups, local communities, private landowners, and other interested stakeholders throughout Maine are willing and ready to step forward and help. As the state’s lead agency for administering this initiative and related funds, MDIFW must use the *Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy* as a means to engage these partners in a direct and meaningful way. The combined commitment, capacity, wisdom, and resources of such a coalition will deliver unparalleled conservation successes.

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